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State Puts Pressure on City Schools Over English Language Learners

By SHARON OTTERMAN

New York City schools are broadly failing to meet the needs of many of their thousands of students who are still learning English, and they must improve or they may face sanctions, state education officials announced Wednesday.

"Clearly the services are poor, and the best indication of that are the student outcomes," John B. King Jr., the state education commissioner, said in a news conference by video link from Albany.

As a measure of the problem, he said, in 2010 only 7 percent of the city's English language learners were found to have graduated on time and ready for college and careers. In the lower grades, 12 percent were proficient in English and 35 percent in math, well behind city averages.

"These numbers are not acceptable," Dr. King said. "We can't leave so many students behind academically without access to college and career opportunities."

More than a year ago, the state directed the city to create a plan to improve its performance, and on Wednesday it released the city's 31-page pledge. Among other things, the plan spells out the extent to which the city is in violation of state law with the services it does provide.

For example, in the 2009-10 school year, about 22 percent of new students who needed to take language assessments to see if they required special services were not tested in a timely manner, the plan said.

Because of shortages of certified teachers, 5,190 children were not getting the language lessons to which they were legally entitled, the city said Wednesday.

And some parents were being deprived of their legal right to choose what kind of program they wanted for their children, whether a bilingual program — in which major subjects are taught in a student's native language — or all classes in English, with some extra help.

The plan promises that the city will begin 125 new bilingual programs at schools in the next three years, and substantially improve its record of providing services. Dr. King said the state was serious about holding the city accountable for meeting its goals, but he stopped short of detailing what sanctions it would face if it failed.

The city's plan calls for placing the main burden of accountability on its more than 1,600 principals; it may place letters in their files or withhold money from their schools if they fail to provide the appropriate paperwork and services.

It also pledges to improve monitoring, try to hire more bilingual teachers and provide extra training on the state's requirements.

Dr. King said there was no new money for the initiative, and the city said it would use existing resources in its cash-poor budget.

In a statement, Dennis M. Walcott, the city schools chancellor, said he looked "forward to working with Commissioner King to implement this bold plan." But no city officials were present at the state's news conference, in what seemed an indication of a continuing disagreement on how to portray school performance.

The city prefers to focus on achievements made — the graduation rate for English language learners, for example, leapt to 41.5 percent in 2010 from 25.1 percent in 2007. The state has been trying to underscore how much further there is to go.

City officials released data Wednesday showing that its compliance had already begun to improve.

During the 2010-11 school year, 86 percent of students with home languages other than English were quickly tested for services, up from 78 percent in 2009-10.

The percentage of students not receiving appropriate services is now smaller, officials said. Of the 165,000 students classified as English learners in the 2010-11 school year, 650 got no services at all and 2,395 lacked an appropriately licensed teacher. Of those 2,395 students, 240 had been struggling to learn English for at least six years.

In general, English language learners test into general education classes after two years, but they are still counted in that classification for accountability purposes two years after they leave the special language classes.

Community groups applauded the announcement, saying they hoped it heralded an era of new attention to a longstanding problem. "Despite persistent underperformance on

measures of academic achievement, English Language Learner students have long been overlooked in wave upon wave of New York City's broad-based school reform efforts," Advocates for Children, a legal aid organization, said in a statement. "Too often we have found that problems arose because E.L.L.'s were an afterthought, if they were considered at all."